

Wiltshire Council

**Cabinet
11 February 2014**

**Council
25 February 2014**

Special Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

Report on the Draft 2014-15 Budget

Purpose of report

To feed back to Cabinet and Full Council a summary of the main issues discussed at the special meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Management Committee held on 5 February 2014.

Background

1. This special meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee provided an opportunity for non-executive councillors to question the Cabinet Member for Finance and the Associate Director for Finance on the draft 2014/15 budget before it is considered at Cabinet on 11 February 2014 and Full Council on 25 February 2014.
2. The Associate Director of Finance and the Cabinet member for Finance gave a presentation covering the key components and influences on setting this year's budget, under the themes below:
 1. Introduction to appendices flow & Key messages
 2. 2013/14 Budget position
 3. Government Funding
 4. Investment
 5. Savings
 6. Other budgets – fees, HRA & Capital
 7. Reserves
 8. Impact on Council Tax

The key messages were as follows:

- CT Frozen again (4th year) and 2014/15 despite 7.6% reduction in Government Revenue grant (32% overall in 5 years)

- Protection of delivery in vulnerable adults and children
- Investment in highways and waste continues
- On top of ongoing investment already agreed on campuses, housing, economy and broadband
- £142m in capital, campuses progressing and hubs in place
- 1% Pay inflation, incremental freeze lifted and pensions funded
- Savings from reducing non-essential spend and efficiency
- Less posts than planned as not filling vacancies
- Despite taking out over £90m in last 4 years with minimised impact on performance

Main issues raised during questioning and debate

1. The Committee acknowledged that 2014/15 was a particularly challenging budget demonstrated by the level of the savings required as detailed in the budget book, with the main concern being that there was little room for flexibility.
2. It was noted that it was projected that the 2013/14 budget would balance at year end despite current continuing overspends in some services. This would be down to the success of recovery plans and underspending in other areas.
3. It was highlighted that there was a lack of focus on risk in the presentation but the Committee was assured that risks have been properly accounted for by the appropriate professionals and adequately catered for in the budget.
4. It was noted that transport was one of the Council's largest expenditures hence the focus of the strategic savings being on this area.
5. It was confirmed that as a Council we do get value from recyclables and that this is reviewed to maximise savings. The Environment Select Committee was aware of this issue and would be looking to investigate it further to incorporate a reward principle into the new waste contract from 2016.
6. The involvement of Area Boards in promoting more effective public consultation on setting the budget should be better utilised, potentially with a dedicated session. It was reported that last year turnout was disappointing at the consultative road shows. This year events have been directed at particular demographic groups. The Committee recognised that by whichever means chosen, that relaying the key messages of the budget to the public required refinement, although doing something meaningful within the timescales set was challenging. It was confirmed that Communications would be producing a summary document for public consumption following Council.
7. The potential influence that campus development could exert within the local economy was felt to be significant and should be fully exploited under Action 2. However it was recognised that contract regulations required fair competition but the nature of the work involved would naturally benefit local suppliers and employment. It was reported that improved controls and challenge are to be put into place within the procurement process to help in such matters.

8. It was confirmed that the pressure points identified in the Report are predominantly due to an increase in demand on the services involved due to the change in demographic, these being Adult Social Care and Children's Services. The Committee accepted the premise of the investments outlined in these areas and that priorities are being set in line with the Business Plan.
9. Clarification was sought in relation to the monies in Action 3 and the role that Area Boards would have to influence other spend beyond the continuing grant. For town and parish councils, despite the grant to offset the consequences of the Council Tax Reductions (CTR which has had the effect of reducing the Council Tax Base) not being ring-fenced by Government, would still be passported to town and parish councils as agreed by Cabinet on 21st November 2013.
10. Action 5 - The Better Care Plan had been drafted and will be ready for release shortly following approval by the Health and Well-Being Board. The funding for which will be drawn from the acute hospitals in the form of top slicing 3% from their budgets to streamline services and form a centralised system aimed at providing more community care. The Health Scrutiny Select Committee would be involved in monitoring delivery.
11. Item 4 of the strategic savings was confirmed to be aimed at subsidised transport and did not constitute a decision to withdraw funding but rather to seek joint funding via the Further Education establishments, with no loss to the service. It was noted that no impact assessment has been completed on this as yet and that Scrutiny should be a part of this process.
12. The detail of Item 13 should be considered by the Highways and Street Scene (BBLP) Task Group.
13. The Voluntary Redundancy scheme yielded more volunteers than anticipated and therefore resulted in higher initial costs to the Council. The shortfall was funded by monies borrowed from reserves and replaced by the additional savings that were accumulated after the one-off payments were made. This resulted in the 'technical' draw down best described as a cash flow issue. Certain costs have also been capitalised under a scheme offered by Government.
14. The work of the Committee's Financial Planning Task Group included early discussion on aligning budget, performance, risk and service planning which would continue through 2014/15. It was anticipated this would enhance its monitoring role and make an overall contribution to reviewing the strategic delivery of the Council's 4-year Business Plan.

Conclusion

1. To thank all those who attended the meeting and contributed to discussion and, in doing so, to acknowledge the work done by the officer team in drawing the budget documents together and the challenges faced by the Executive in difficult financial circumstances.

2. Cabinet and Full Council are asked to take this summary of the issues raised at the special scrutiny meeting into account when finalising the budget and council tax for 2014/15.

Cllr Simon Killane
Chairman –Overview & Scrutiny Management Committee

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